

American Jewish Committee
99th Annual Meeting
Topic: Combating Terrorism in Free Societies
May 5, 2005

On the eve of its 100th anniversary, the American Jewish Committee has much to celebrate. Over the past century, the AJC has earned the respect of world leaders and the admiration of civil rights and human rights organizations for its efforts to promote pluralism and democracy, minority rights and social justice. Your work is a source of pride for the Jewish community as a whole.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today about the War on Terror.

President Bush has laid out a determined vision that the fight against terrorism and the march toward democracy go hand and hand. In the last year, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have all taken steps toward free elections.

However, it is a bumpy road. In Iraq, there are still numerous attacks. In the Palestinian Authority, Hamas could win a number of seats in parliamentary elections this summer. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is poised to gain seats in the upcoming elections as well.

The international community continues to have a muddled philosophy about “one man’s terrorist being another man’s freedom fighter.” We need a stronger international consensus about what constitutes a terrorist attack.

For this reason, Congress has required the State Department to issue an annual report describing the trends and patterns of global terrorism. For 20 years, this report has been one of the most important documents in the world regarding terrorism. It is also a fundamental measure to gauge the success of our own counterterrorism policies.

Then last year, the Bush Administration issued a report showing “great progress” and a significant decrease in terrorist acts. As it turned out, they were wrong. Terrorism experts demonstrated that the data in the report was calculated incorrectly, it failed to count numerous attacks, and it simply omitted attacks from an entire month. Once corrected, the data indicated that significant terrorist attacks actually reached a 20-year high.

This year, the story was even worse. First the Administration wasn't going to release the data at all. When they finally did, it showed that terrorist attacks had tripled. Attacks in Iraq were nine times as high as last year. Attacks in Afghanistan doubled. The number of injuries worldwide jumped from about 3,600 to over 6,700. And while there were 625 deaths in 2003, there were over 1,900 deaths in 2004.

Of course, nobody who has been watching the Bush Administration expected them to come out and say "the latest data shows our policies aren't working."

But a reasonable person, looking at these record increases, might have expected them to say, "You know, this new data is extremely troubling. And given these increases, we feel it is incumbent on us to go back and revisit our policies to make sure they are targeted, that they are efficient, and that they aren't resulting in unforeseen consequences or counterproductive effects."

Instead, the Administration broke with two decades of history and argued that the data just doesn't matter. It's simply irrelevant. Data on terrorist attacks is no longer a valid indicator for determining whether we are succeeding in the war on terror.

When the report was rolled out last week with these astronomical numbers, Phillip Zelikow, who is Secretary Rice's top lawyer stated: "the short answer is, it doesn't tell us anything about the war on terror." He even restated his position, saying: "The statistics are simply not valid for any inference about the progress, either good or bad, of American policy."

If our goal – both nationally and globally – isn't to lower the actual number of terrorist attacks, what exactly are we trying to accomplish?

How can we tell if we are succeeding if the War on Terrorism is shrouded in secrecy or hyperbole? Unfortunately this is the same problem with Administration counterterrorism policies here at home.

The major reason the Patriot Act is so controversial is the lack of transparency. After September 11, Congress worked quickly and passed the Patriot Act in good confidence. However, the Bush Administration has refused to explain how it is using its expanded powers. Without information there can be no effective oversight. As a result there is now hesitation in Congress against renewing this authority as provisions expire.

The treatment of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison is another disturbing example. The gruesome photos and acts of abuse go against everything America stands for. It has done serious damage to our international credibility. Yet, there has been no comprehensive investigation of the extent of this serious problem.

While the individual soldiers who perpetrated these crimes have been put on trial, the Defense Department Inspector General last week cleared their superiors of any wrongdoing.

In Guantanamo Bay, despite a Supreme Court ruling, the Administration continues to interfere with detainees' access to counsel, their access to U.S. courts, and their right to know what crimes they are charged with. And we are just beginning to learn about the CIA sending detainees to third countries to be tortured.

If the President truly believes that the fight against terrorism and the march toward democracy go hand and hand, this Administration needs to be more mindful of its own responsibility to act with transparency and accountability and uphold the rule of law.